

Message Text

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FOR HIRSCH

FOLLOWING REPEAT TEL AVIV 3346 ACTION SECSTATE INFO AMMAN
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 3346

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS:PINT, PFOR, IS, US

SUBJECT: ISRAELI ELECTION AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

REFS: (A) TEL AVIV 3218, (B) TEL AVIV 3219, (C) TEL AVIV 3270

BEGIN SUMMARY: WITH THE ELECTIONCAMPAIGN FOR THE NINTH KNESSET
IN ITS FINAL WEEK, OBSERVERS ARE AGREED THAT IT WILL BE
THE MOST DIFFICULT ELECTION IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY TO PREDICT.
BECAUSE OF THIS UNCERTANITY, LAST MINUTE DEVELOPMENTS MAY
BE VERY IMPORTANT. IN THIS SITUATION, THE
LIKELIHOOD OF U.S. PRESSURE ON ISRAEL IN THE MONTHS AHEAD
MAY BE A FACTOR IN THE ELECTION; IT MAY ALSO BE A FACTOR IN
THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOW DURING EFFORTS TO FORM A GOVERNMENT
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COALITION. END SUMMARY.

1. MOST POLITICAL OBSERVERS TO WHOM WE HAVE SPOKEN IN
RECENT DAYS AGREE THAT THE RESULTS OF NEXT TUESDAY'S ELECTION
ARE MORE DIFFICULT TO PREDICT THAN EVER BEFORE IN
ISRAEL. THERE ARE THREE REASONS FOR THIS. FIRST, WHILE
THERE WAS PREVIOUSLY NO QUESTION ABOUT WHO WOULD WIN AN

ELECTION (EXCEPT FOR THE POST-YOM KIPPUR WAR ELECTION), THERE IS WIDE UNCERTAINTY THIS TIME. MOST BELIEVE THE ALIGNMENT WILL PROBABLY WIN AND PERES WILL BE THE NEW PRIME MINISTER, BUT THERE IS GREATER DOUBT OVER THE ALIGNMENT'S PROSPECTS THAN IN PREVIOUS ELECTIONS. SECOND, THE PRESENCE OF A NEW PARTY, WHICH WILL PROBABLY COME IN THIRD IN THE ELECTION, BOLLIxes MOST OBSERVERS' PROGNOSTICATIONS. ISRAEL HAS A HISTORY OF NEW POLITICAL PARTIES AND FACTIONS BEING FORMED PRIOR TO ELECTIONS, BUT IT IS RARE THAT ONE OF THEM HAS THE PROSPECT OF BEING A MAJOR FORCE AND THIS ELEMENT MAKES VERY DIFFICULT THE PRECISE PREDICTION OF DISTRIBUTION OF KNESSET SEATS. THIRD, THERE ARE LARGE NUMBERS OF VOTERS WHO HAVE NOT YET DECIDED HOW THEY WILL VOTE -- MOST POLLS SHOW THE PERCENTAGE OF UNCOMMITTED VOTERS TO BE BETWEEN 30 AND 40 PER CENT. AGAIN, THIS IS NOT A NEW FACTOR IN ISRAELI ELECTIONS, BUT IT IS UNUSUAL THAT SO MANY ARE UNCOMMITTED SO LATE.

2. IN THESE FINAL DAYS OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, THERE ARE ALMOST DAILY MEETINGS BETWEEN LEADERS OF VARIOUS POLITICAL GROUPS, PARTIES AND FACTIONS REGARDING POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS OF PARTIES IN THE NEXT GOVERNMENT COALITION. ONCE AGAIN THIS IS NOT NEW; HOWEVER, THE INTENSITY AND NUMBER OF THESE DISCUSSIONS IS INTERPRETED AS AN ADDITIONAL INDICATION OF THE LACK OF PREDICTABILITY OF THE ELECTION RESULTS: IT SEEMS AS THOUGH POLITICAL LEADERS ARE SEEKING TO COVER ALL BETS AS THEY CONSIDER POSSIBLE COALITION COMBINATIONS. FOR EXAMPLE, THERE HAS BEEN DISCUSSION

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OF A POSSIBLE COMBINATION, OF WHICH WE HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY HEARD, BETWEEN THE LIKUD, THE NRP AND PART OF THE DMC; THIS WOULD OBVIOUSLY BE A VIABLE POSSIBILITY ONLY IF THE LIKUD GETS MORE THAN PRESENT POLLS INDICATE. INCIDENTALLY, THERE IS WIDESPREAD TALK OF THE POSSIBILITY OF ANOTHER ELECTION IN THE NEAR FUTURE, PERHAPS BEFORE THE END OF THE YEAR, IF, AS SOME FEAR, THE ELECTION RESULTS DO NOT PERMIT A VIABLE COALITION.

3. SOME OF THIS LACK OF CLARITY IN THE FINAL DAYS OF THE CAMPAIGN CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO A LATE EROSION IN SUPPORT FOR THE ALIGNMENT. PERES HAS NOT PROVEN TO BE AS EFFECTIVE IN THE CAMPAIGN AS INITIALLY BELIEVED. PART OF THIS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE LAW WHICH PROHIBITS GOVERNMENT LEADERS FROM BEING SHOWN ON TELEVISION, EVEN IN NEWSCASTS, AND PERES HAS NOT BEEN IN THE PUBLIC EYE AS MUCH AS HE WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE BEEN BECAUSE OF THIS CAMPAIGN RULE. IN ADDITION, THE PARTY IS STILL NOT ENTIRELY UNITED BEHIND HIM AND THE LABOR

PARTY HAS SIMPLY NOT MADE ITS WEIGHT FELT TO THE EXTENT THAT WAS ANTICIPATED.

4. THIS UNCLEAR PICTURE HAS BEEN MUDDIED EVEN MORE IN RECENT DAYS BY ISRAELI EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN ABOUT U.S. PLANS FOR MIDDLE EAST NEGOTIATIONS. EXAMPLES OF THIS ADDITIONAL FACTOR OF UNCLARITY HAVE BEEN PERES' ATTEMPT LAST WEEK TO WARN THE U.S. ABOUT THE DANGERS OF COMING FORTH WITH A PLAN -- AN EFFORT WHICH WAS NOT ENTIRELY SUCCESSFUL BECAUSE SOME REPORTERS SAID HE "WELCOMED" THE SECRETARY'S STATEMENT THAT THE U.S. WOULD HAVE SUGGESTIONS ON CORE ISSUES (REFTEL A) -- AND THE CRITICAL COMMENT IN THE ISRAELI PRESS ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT'S RECENT FINDING THAT ISRAEL WOULD NOT ENJOY THE SAME FAVORED STATUS FOR ARMS SUPPLY PURPOSES AS U.S. ALLIES (REFTEL C). THERE ARE CONFLICTING VIEWS REGARDING WHICH PARTY MAY BENEFIT IN NEXT WEEK'S ELECTION FROM THESE
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EVENTS, WHICH ARE SEEN AS INDICATIONS OF U.S. POLICIES DIVERGING FROM THOSE OF ISRAEL AND OF THE LIKELIHOOD OF PRESSURE IN THE WEEKS AHEAD ON THE GOI. SOME ARGUE, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT THIS PERCEPTION WILL BENEFIT THE LIKUD BECAUSE ISRAELI VOTERS WILL FEEL THAT IF PRESSURE FROM THE UNITED STATES IS INEVITABLE, IT IS BETTER FOR ISRAEL TO HAVE A PRIME MINISTER LIKE BEGIN WHO CAN BE EXPECTED TO STAND UP TO THE AMERICANS. OTHERS ARGUE THAT ISRAELI VOTERS WILL REACT TO FEARS OF INCREASED PRESSURE BY RETURNING TO THE ALIGNMENT BECAUSE ITS KNOWN AND FAMILIAR LEADERS HAVE DEMONSTRATED LEADERSHIP IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS IN THE PAST. MOST WOULD AGREE THAT CONCERN ABOUT FUTURE DIFFICULTIES WILL RESULT IN SOME LOSS OF SUPPORT FOR THE DMC BECAUSE IT IS AN UNKNOWN AND UNTRIED POLITICAL GROUP.

5. POLITICAL OBSERVERS TO WHOM WE HAVE SPOKEN IN RECENT DAYS ARE UNANIMOUS IN SAYING THAT NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR THE U.S. TO APPEAR TO BE MOVING AWAY FROM ISREL. THEIR ARGUMENT IS THAT THE PERCEIVED STRAINS BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES, AS WELL AS INTIMATIONS THAT THE U.S. WILL SOON EXERT PRESSURE ON ISRAEL, WILL INEVITABLY AID THE LIKUD AND HARM THE ALIGNMENT IN NEXT WEEK'S ELECTION. THEY TELL US BLUNTLY THAT TALK OF PLANS AND SUGGESTIONS, LET ALONE IMPOSED SETTLEMENTS, IS THE BEST PATH TO HAVING A LIKUD GOVERNMENT. "IF YOU WANT TO HAVE PERES AS PRIME MINISTER, SAY NOTHING DURING THE NEXT WEEK REGARDING MIDDLE EAST NEGOTIATIONS." LOOKING FURTHER AHEAD, THESE SAME OBSERVERS ARGUE THAT U.S. PRESSURE, OR PERCEPTIONS OF SUCH PRESSURE, WILL CONTRIBUTE EITHER TO A WALL-TO-WALL COALITION INVOLVING THE ALIGNMENT, THE DMC, THE NRP

AND THE LIKUD OR TO A LIKUD-LED COALITION; THEY
ARGUE THAT IF A U.S.GOAL IS TO HAVE AN ALIGN-
MENT-LED COALITION WITHOUT THE LIKUD, STATEMENTS WHICH
ARE SEEN AS INDICATIONS OF U.S. PLANS FOR GENEVA WOULD
BEST BE KEPT UNSAID DURING THE GOVERNMENT FORMATION
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PERIOD.

6. COMMENT: THESE WARNINGS ARE OF COURSE TO SOME
EXTENT SELF-SERVING--TO DETER US FROM EXERTING
WHAT ISRAEL MIGHT CONSIDER UNDESIRABLE PRESSURE.
MOREOVER, AS NOTED ABOVE, WE CANNOT BE SURE WHICH
PARTY THE U.S. "PRESSURE" WILL HELP. HOWEVER,
PUBLIC DISCUSSION IS PROBABLY INEVITABLE AND
NECESSARY IN ISRAEL ITSELF. ANY ISRAELI
GOVERNMENT CAN UNDERTAKE COMMITMENTS IN MIDDLE
EAST NEGOTIATIONS ONLY TO THE EXTENT IT FEELS IT
HAS PUBLIC SUPPORT, AND THAT PUBLIC SUPPORT CAN
BEST BE THRESHED OUT IN AN OPEN AND PUBLIC
DISCUSSION INVOLVING THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC
OPINION IN THIS COUNTRY.
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